

Letting God Be God

Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; whenever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped.

Numbers 9:18

As I write this, my fellow congregation members and I continue to lose control of our surroundings. Our church offices have been relocated three miles from our neighborhood, things are still in boxes, and, to make things worse, telephone and internet access has been problematic at best. Our place of worship is moving to a location in the opposite direction and into the sanctuary of a parish culturally different from ours. The start time of our Sunday service is changing to an hour considerably earlier than our bodies are used to. Our clocks are off, our routines decimated. In short, we're in the midst of a major building renovation.

But the physical building is not the only thing being deconstructed at the moment. So are the things we do and the way we do them. Ministries and programs we've faithfully, if perhaps mechanically, slogged away at for years need to be significantly altered or even, in some cases, indefinitely suspended. Such change, especially for those of us most given to the familiar and predictable, can be quite threatening. We're addicted to knowing what tomorrow will look like.

One example of "ministry upheaval" has been our beloved after-school tutoring program, which has served children of both church and neighborhood for over 15 years. For those who have devoted many years to this outreach, questions abound. What will happen to the children once the program goes on hiatus? Will the relationships continue without the weekly structure? How about our relationships as a tutoring team? What will I do with myself if I'm not tutoring a child? What will after-school ministry look like when we start it back up...if, in fact, we do?

Such questions can feel quite per-

sonal and emotionally charged when our sense of security, identity, or worth becomes wrapped up in the ministries we're invested in. But we're finding that when we're in touch with such threats, God's grace is manifest, for our real idols are mercifully exposed. We discover the counterfeits that we truly attend to—whether our need for significance or for the absence of fail-

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ure. In these epiphanies, we have the opportunity to repudiate the fears that tyrannize our lives and turn to the only one who is worthy of our trust.

In this season of disorientation, the book of Numbers has been particularly meaningful. We resonate with the stubborn band of Israelites who want the Promised Land yet keep looking back, when the going gets tough, to provision under imperial Egypt. Or the initial excitement and disciplined preparation for the journey ahead that quickly gives way to complaining, finger-pointing, and waning confidence in the leaders that Yahweh has appointed among them. Or the well-meaning Reubenites and Gadites who choose to settle for less and miss the best. We learn that it is not so easy to watch for the cloud above our tent and wait, or move for-

ward, as the Lord dictates. But when we do, we discover a God whose ways are far bigger than ours.

To relinquish control is profoundly counterintuitive for a people shaped by the imperialist instinct that is the American national psyche. We're accustomed to power, wielding all the tools necessary to maintain an environment that serves our agenda. Furthermore, it is in times of chaos when we're tempted not only to aggressively seize control of the environment, but to alter the environment in a fashion that is favorable to our interests. We see this impulse demonstrated throughout the history of the United States, from the wresting of Native American lands and the annexation of Mexican and Spanish territories, to the covert manipulation of governments and economies in Latin America and other parts of the world. We see it today in the post-9/11 proliferation of domestic surveillance and control policies, the ideological push for privatization (whether in Pentagon planning or Wisconsin municipal legislation) in times of fiscal crises, or the neoconservative designs for American-led change amidst the current uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East.

While our nation (or, more accurately, various sub-operatives within it) chomps at the bit to solve—or capitalize on—the unraveling spaces of our world, both within and outside our borders, the body of Christ is presented with an important task. We can demonstrate to the world that human control is ultimately a delusion—in fact a tyranny—and that true hope is found when we simply let God be God.



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